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ABSTRACT

An approach to reading used with adult students of English as a second language (ESL) is described. The approach has three components: communicating to students the role of reading in second language development; introducing students to popular novels; and assisting students in developing high levels of reading efficacy. The method was used in a community ESL class with intermediate- and high-level ESL students, none of whom had read a book in English. The report reviews theory and research on the role of literature in second language development, outlines specific classroom techniques for making the reading of extensive texts easier, discusses considerations in book selection and the books chosen for classroom use, describes class activities and procedures, and presents excerpts of students' written responses to the class. Contains 11 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Lucy Tse

If You Lead Horses to Water They Will Drink: Introducing Second Language Adults to Books in English

The benefits of reading for second language acquisition are well documented. Reading for pleasure builds vocabulary and improves reading comprehension, spelling, grammar usage, and writing (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1993, Cho & Krashen, 1994; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1994). Pleasure reading supplies large amounts of language input in a low affective medium, and its enjoyable nature acts as a built-in motivator. Despite the strong case for pleasure reading, however, few second language learners do any kind of reading on their own (Huber, 1993; McQuillan and Rodrigo, in press). The problem may be a combination of low levels of confidence and not knowing how or where to begin. The purpose of this article is to introduce teachers to a method of encouraging reading among second language learners, to show how it was implemented in an ESL program, and to present some student reactions to the course.

To promote reading among second language learners, an approach was developed consisting of three components: Communicating to students the role of reading in language development, introducing students to popular novels, and helping students develop high levels of reading efficacy. This approach was used in a reading course designed for intermediate and high level adult ESL students enrolled in a community language course. The 10-week course met one evening each week for three hours. The ten students had elected to take the course for a variety of reasons. A majority felt that their reading ability in English was low and wanted to find ways to improve it. A few enjoyed reading in their first language and wanted to try reading in their second language. These students had one thing in common: None of them had ever read a book in English. It was necessary, then, to introduce students to the idea of reading for language development.

Introducing Reading for Language Development

Giving students a rationale for reading novels for acquiring language is more important than one might think. Even students who enroll in a reading course may assume, based on previous experience in language courses, that the curriculum would consist of reading exercises such as timed readings, comprehension tests, vocabulary drills and the like. I found that discussing the benefits of pleasure reading gave students a sense of understanding and confidence that the activities in the course would be helpful for their language learning.

In this community adult class, the students were not adverse to reading novels, but thought that it was a luxury they could not afford. They needed to improve their English as quickly as possible and believed that they needed precisely the types of activities that they dreaded most - - reading aloud, memorizing vocabulary, and doing reading drills. In short, they thought that language learning was hard work.

To get students to understand that the old adage "no pain, no gain" did not apply to language learning, I discussed with them language acquisition theory, and stressed that research on second language acquisition showed pleasure reading, or free voluntary reading (FVR), to be the most efficient and effective way to develop all areas of language (see Krashen, 1993 for a review). For example, Elley (1991) examined the effects of providing English language students with books (what he called "book flood") over the course of one to three years and found that students who participated in the "book flood" experience did remarkably better than the students who received traditional language arts instruction on tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening comprehension, and writing. Pilgreen and Krashen (1993) found that high school ESL students who were exposed to books and given about 15 minutes a day in class to read gained an average of 15 months on a standardized reading comprehension test in only 16 weeks, nearly one month gain for each week of the program. A study by Cho and Krashen (1994) found that ESL adults who were given books from the Sweet Valley Kids series gained significant amounts of vocabulary and developed high levels of confidence in their language ability, including oral language and listening comprehension.

I explained to the students that language is acquired through understanding messages (what Krashen, 1985 calls "comprehensible input") that are slightly above a learner's level of competence. Even though there are unknown words in a message, understanding the surrounding context makes those words comprehensible. Each time the new word is encountered in context, the learner picks up a bit more of its meaning until the word becomes part of the learner's vocabulary (Nagy & Herman, 1987). The process is subconscious and painless. The key, then, is to find messages that provide the right levels of language input and that maintain the learner's interest.

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Reading Tips

With an understanding of the benefits of reading, students were receptive to reading novels, but had lingering doubts about their ability to read large amounts of text. I shared with them some tips that would make reading easier and more enjoyable (Dupuy, Cook & Tse, 1995; McQuillan, 1994).

1. Avoid using the dictionary to look up unknown words. If you cannot guess the meaning from context, simply move on. Remember that each time you encounter a word, you pick up a little bit of the meaning.

2. Read at a steady, quick pace. If you read too slowly, you'll find that as you reach the end of the paragraph, you will have forgotten what you read at the beginning.

3. The first 20 pages will be more difficult than the rest of the book. You are getting to know new characters and settings. But if you make it over the hump, the rest of the book will be much easier

4. Get in the habit of reading everyday. Trying to read a book in one or two sittings is tiring and overwhelming, even for native speakers.

Students were warned to expect some initial frustration. Other students who have tried pleasure reading in the past have told me that it is very difficult to resist the temptation to pick up the dictionary when they met a new word. What these students also found, however, was that these frequent interruptions were tiresome, and in the end, caused them to stop reading altogether. Students were encouraged to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity, especially with the start of each new book, and to save content or language questions for class discussion.

Book Selection

For the initial weeks of the course I assigned two books that ESL students in my other courses had enjoyed: *Animal Farm* by George Orwell for week 1 and *Love Story* by Erich Segal for week 2. The students were then told that they would choose the books for the remaining eight weeks of the course. I introduced them to various genres of popular fiction - - romance, detective, westerns, science fiction, courtroom dramas, comic books - - by bringing several books from each genre to class. Students were given twenty minutes in each of the first two sessions to browse through the books, to ask me for recommendations or plot summaries, and to discuss the choices with each other. They were asked to come to a consensus on at least four books by the end of the second class meeting. The students chose Conrad Richter's *The Light in the Forest* (one student's son was reading this book in school and she was curious about its contents), the detective novel *B is for Burglar* by Sue Grafton, the classic *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and the unusual love story *Like Water For Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel. With these selections made, the students and I designed a reading schedule for the remainder of the course. The shorter books were read over one week and the lengthier ones were read over two.

In-class Activities

The majority of class time was devoted to book-related discussions that centered around questions and issues raised by either the students or me. I normally had "discussion questions" that related to issues and themes of the story or genre. Unlike comprehension questions, these "questions" were aimed at getting students to relate the stories to their own experiences or previous reading, to extend the issues to other contexts, and to elicit their feelings and opinions about the reading. The discussions were guided by the "questions" or by the students themselves who were encouraged to take the lead. Many times, I acted more as a participant than a teacher, only stepping back into the role to answer language questions.

There was no direct language instruction. Instead, language issues were addressed when students had questions or if they emerged during discussions. In the first two weeks, I made a point of asking students if they had specific words or phrases they wanted to discuss. I noticed that nearly all of the students had underlined, circled, or highlighted unknown words and many of them had definitions written in the margins in their native language. But as the weeks progressed, I noticed fewer and fewer ink marks in their books and I asked one student why she had stopped. She said that she was so caught up in the story sometimes she forgot to underline new words.

At the end of each class session I spent 15 minutes to a half hour giving the students some background information about the book they would read for the following week. Having background knowledge greatly assists in making sense of new texts. For each book, students were given a one to two-page background sheet with a brief summary of the plot, a list of the main characters, and any relevant historical, social, or cultural information. I went through these materials with the students and added related information and answered questions. For example, before reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, I gave the students a brief outline of the history of racism in the United States and the culture of the American South. Similarly, for *The Light in the Forest*, I brought in two *Newsweek* articles with opposing views on Christopher Columbus, one by a Native American who objected to the national Columbus holiday, and the other, by someone who advocated honoring Columbus for his

accomplishments. After reading excerpts from these articles, we discussed the history of conflict between settlers and the Native Americans, Native American culture, and the setting of the story.

Student Reactions

In all but the first class session, students were asked to write briefly about their experiences, including difficulties they encountered, reading habits, and their reactions to the books. In the beginning, some students noted having difficulty understanding the reading. One student, Yasako, wrote:

> This is my first novel in English. I first tried to read this throughout without dictionary in two days. It was so hard to read and still I couldn't catch some (words). And I felt a headache.

Hideko had similar frustrations:

> When I come up with the vocabulary that I don't understand, I get irritated. Especially when I am reading something doesn't interest me so much and then I am lost.

However, they overcame these initial difficulties rather quickly. Yasako, the first student, wrote the following just two weeks later:

> I felt more comfortable to read this book than before. The book was so interesting that I couldn't waste time to use dictionary. And I didn't mind if I couldn't understand some words. Actually, I like reading books and now I think I like to read books even in English.

The second student, Hideko, also found that as she continued to read, it became easier. She enjoyed reading *Love Story* and she noted that "It was fun to follow the conversation between Oliver and Jenny (the two main characters.)" Normally students write a paragraph about their reading; Hideko wrote a full page of reactions to this story. She said she enjoyed the style of writing, reflected on the conflict between the main characters, and commented on the tragic ending of the story.

Several other students mentioned that they got "caught up" in the books. One student told me that she was so engrossed in the detective novel that she read it in two days. Due to the length of the book (over 250 pages), we had decided to read it over two weeks. The student took home another detective novel by the same author and read it in the second week. She said she didn't stop once while reading either book to consult a dictionary or to note unknown words.

This was not the case for all of the books. The student whose son was reading *Light in the Forest* at school said that she was not as interested in this book as compared to the others and it was difficult for her to finish. Her comments highlight the importance and difficulty of finding stories that maintain the interest of all students. Since this course covered a variety of genres, one would not expect all students to respond equally favorably to the books. What is important is that students get a chance to find out what they do like and to be acquainted with books and authors in the genres they prefer.

All of the students appeared to have gained confidence about their reading ability and found, to the surprise of many, that they liked reading in English. On the last day of the course, the students were asked to reflect on the experience they had had over the previous ten weeks. Hideko, the student who found reading so frustrating initially wrote the following: "I didn't use to like reading before. After I took this class, I think, I became interested in reading and I will keep trying to read as many books as I can." Yasako, who previously experienced headaches when she read in English wrote:

> Before this class, I only read newspaper, but now I like to read in English too . . . I got six English books which I read! To know American culture is interesting, for example, now I know a little bit about the East Coast preppies, Native Americans, and South. After I read books and understand words, I feel comfortable to watch T.V.

Finally, Elenor, who had always wanted to try reading in English but doubted her ability, commented:

> What happened to me because of this class is that I've realized I can actually read English literature. Before I always wanted to read in my own language but now I will try to read English literature even when I'm back in my own country.

What happened to these students after only ten weeks is quite remarkable and is testimony to the power of introducing books to second language students. The impact of reading on students' English language proficiency after such a short time is difficult to measure. However, it is clear from their comments that they have already begun to reap the benefits of reading. Now that they are aware of what is available to them to read and have overcome their reading apprehensions, these students are ready to continue reading on their own.

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